3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

3.13 Visual and Scenic Resources

The CDCA planning area is distinguished by its unique arrangement of low-lying desert landscape and high terrain of the San Jacinto, San Bernardino, Little San Bernardino and Santa Rosa Mountains. These contrasting viewsheds result in an exceptional display of open space and mountain scenery that enhance the aesthetic quality of the area. The mountainous portions of the planning area are comprised of highly differential rock formations, large expanses of light gray granite, and a diversity of vegetation, including live oak and towering pines. Views of the mountain ranges that ring much of the planning area, in particular, are highly valued.

The two highest peaks associated with the region are San Jacinto Peak in the San Jacinto Mountains, which rises to an elevation of 10,804 feet, and San Gorgonio Peak in the San Bernardino Mountains, with an elevation of 11,502 feet. The rise of Mt. San Jacinto, from the desert floor to the peak, is the steepest gradient in North America. The Santa Rosa Mountains extend through the southwest portion of the planning area. The highest peaks in the Santa Rosa Mountains include Toro Peak at 8,717 and Santa Rosa Peak at about 8,000 feet. To the north and northeast of the subject property are the Indio Hills, with elevations rising to about 1,600 feet.

The lower elevations of the CDCA planning area include numerous alluvial fans and cone, which form at the mouth of the many canyons draining the area mountains. These expansive deposition areas form an important and visually interesting transition between the foothills and mountains, and the valley floor. The alluvial fans also are comprised of washes and braided streams that support important habitat and diverse visual character.

The valley floor is comprised of a mix of sand dunes, sand fields and more limited areas of desert pavement swept clear of sand. Dunes and sand fields are archetypal desert visual resources with high visual resource value. In many areas, they are enhanced by the presence of mesquite hummocks that provide a vivid contrast of green against the light color of expanses of sand. In the spring, the dunes and sand fields are also frequently covered with a profusion of annual plants, including sand verbena and mallow.

In the central portion of the valley, the Indio and Mecca Hills have been uplifted by compressive forces associated with the San Andreas Fault Zone, which passes through the long northwest – southeast axis of the Coachella Valley. Along the fault zone, fault dikes have blocked and impounded the movement of ground water. This has resulted in the emergence of numerous groves of native desert fan palms (*Washingtonia filifera*) and associated mesquite and other vegetation, which also provide a unique and high value visual resource.

The lowest portions of the planning area are also a result of tectonic forces associated with the San Andreas Fault Zone. The Coachella Valley is the northwestern extension of a fault-controlled spreading zone, which extends from the Gulf of California in Mexico. The spreading and subsidence has created a terminal lake, the Salton Sea, which has no outlet and currently stands at a surface elevation of 228 feet below mean sea level.

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) requires BLM to protect the quality of scenic values on public lands (43 USC 1701). BLM has developed an analytical process that identifies, sets, and meets objectives for maintaining scenic values and visual quality. The Visual Resource Management (VRM) system functions in two ways. First, BLM conducts an inventory that evaluates visual resources on all lands under its jurisdiction (Inventory/Evaluation). Once inventoried and analyzed, lands are given relative visual ratings (Management Classifications). Class designations are derived from an analysis of Scenic Quality (rated by landform, vegetation, water, color, influence of adjacent scenery, scarcity, and cultural modification), a determination of Viewer Sensitivity Levels (sensitivity of people to changes in the landscape), and Distance Zones (visual quality of a landscape, as well as user reaction, may be magnified or diminished by the visibility of the landscape). Management Classes describe the different degrees of modification allowed to the basic elements of the landscape (form, line, color, texture).

Second, when a site specific project is proposed, the degree of contrast between the proposed activity and the existing landscape is measured (Contrast Rating). The Contrast Rating process compares the proposed activity with existing conditions element by element (form, line, color, texture) and feature by feature (land/water surface, vegetation, structures). The Contrast Rating is compared to the appropriate Management Class to determine if contrasts are acceptable. If the proposed project exceeds the allowable contrast, a BLM decision is made to (1) redesign, (2) abandon or reject, or (3) proceed, but with mitigation measures stipulated to reduce critical impacts. The VRM Management Class Objectives are defined as follows:

> **Class 1**: Natural ecological changes and very limited management activity are allowed. Any contrast created within the characteristic landscape must not attract attention. This classification is applied to wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, and other similar situations.
> **Class 2**: Changes in any of the basic elements caused by management activity should not be evident in the characteristic landscape. Contrasts are visible, but must not attract attention.
> **Class 3**: Changes to the basic elements caused by management activity may be evident, but should remain subordinate to existing landscape.
> **Class 4**: Any contrast may attract attention and be a dominant feature of the landscape in terms of scale, but it should repeat the form, line, color, and texture of the characteristic landscape.
> **Class 5**: This classification is applied to areas where natural character of the landscape has been disturbed to a point where rehabilitation is needed to bring it up to one of the four other classifications.